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THE BIOGRAPHY OF SIDNEY LANIER¹

There was hardly any question that a biography of Sidney Lanier would be admitted to the American Men of Letters series. Of the so-called "Southern" writers Poe was a national, even a cosmopolitan, figure; but Simms and Lanier were admitted perhaps as much for being types and representatives of definite periods as for their innate worth. The opportunity of Professor Trent's "Simms" lay just here; and whatever opinions may be held as to it, it became really a study of Southern conditions and culture and thought in the generation preceding the Civil War. In Sidney Lanier's case, the opportunity was even greater — it was to make a biography of Lanier the study of the conditions existing and fermenting after war, the gathering together of forces which lay scattered and despoiled and inert, their conservation and development into the strength of a New South, itself tortuously working with new problems into the realization of a coming to-morrow. In Lanier's own life and generation this realization was not to be achieved — it could only be dreamed of. Its spirit could be siezed and transmitted only by a stronger generation born after war, brought up on a changed soil under different conditions; and the end is not even yet.

Lanier's failure of physical health was seemingly due to the exhaustions and privations of war time and the terrific gloom that followed. Sixteen years after the close of the war his life ebbed away. And it is easy to see that his failure in education, in work, in art, in achievement — the instinctive struggle to get away from the central South, and even beyond its borders, to create richer opportunities and live a fuller life, was due to the same exhausting causes. No great scholar and artist could possibly have arisen under these circumstances — graduating from a remote and unknown Southern college in 1860, immediately swept into the mad vortex of war, and then plunged into worse than war — darkness and utter stagnation of life and mind, to be

¹ SIDNEY LANIER. By Edwin Mims. Illustrated. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Company. 1905. \$1.50 net.

relieved only by social revolution, violence, and tardy recuperation. The example is one of intense effort and will power asserted against circumstance — the fell circumstance of disease — by the poet and by the community and state. Worn with the personal struggle, but prefiguring by his ideals the rejuvenescence and the re-creation to follow, the poet succumbed in 1881: the state and a younger citizenship still continue the intense struggle which may take still further generations to bring into the perfect day. Some picture like this seems true of the setting and the life and the position of Sidney Lanier.

Turning to the book in hand, how is the work conceived and how accomplished? Let us hasten to say cordially that Professor Mims shows himself a most painstaking and conscientious biographer. The work is faithfully, perhaps even laboriously, done. All the material obtainable from Lanier's family and from friends, as well as from Lanier's writings, has been carefully gone over and many extracts culled. The biography is extremely accurate. The modern method of annotation and reference to an immediate authority is used and in no way abused. Letters are freely quoted — in the latter portion, too frequently, we think, in full, where the heart of them could be better presented by a short quotation or a paragraph. It is disturbing to see dates and headlines and introductory and irrelevant matter in a continuous literary presentation; and this fault is seen in only one instance in the first part of the book, which is more carefully done and more strongly mastered. But the larger study of the poet's life and the deeper significance of the forces at work in this tremendous period which in so many ways hedged about and restricted the poet's career and yet curiously gave him his liberty to sing even out of its very bitterness and chequered gladness; the thoroughgoing grasp and the philosophic treatment of contemporary life, not only Southern, but American, which may not be wholly left out of sight — social, economic, educational, cultural, artistic, literary — are wanting. The early portions of the book, chapters one to five, are the most attractive. The early life, the right subordination of war themes — Lanier was not noted as a soldier — the new beginnings, wherever there is the personal portrayal, are well done. But when this is over,

when Lanier has had his two graduations — from college and from arms, and when should come the struggle, the work, the achievement, the climax — the material wearies, the style flags, the interest is not compelling, the presentation not convincing.

Just why this should be, why the final impression should be one of depression, instead of a fixed spiritual exaltation, in tracing the aspiration and struggles of Lanier's life, is at first not a little puzzling. We believe one reason is to be found in the Introduction of eight pages, which was probably written last and certainly should have been put last as a final summing up, and by all means should be read last in order not to be robbed of the best pleasure the volume affords, the relative enthusiasm and charm of the earlier chapters. Coming so early, the second paragraph of this Introduction acts as a wet blanket thrown in the face. "It cannot be said, however, that Lanier's rank as a poet . . . is yet fixed. He is a very uneven writer and his defects are glaring. Some of the best American critics — men who have a right to speak with authority — shake their heads in disapproval at what they call the Lanier cult." Etc., etc., etc. And this on page 2 of the book! Some may find this piquant and stimulative of curiosity. But confronted with this assurance emphasized at the outset through several paragraphs, there will also be some readers who will not have the hardihood to plunge into 370 pages farther, unless relieved by counter attractions; and some authors could not have written farther. Without objecting necessarily to a single word in the judgment expressed, it is nevertheless a structural mistake to present the dolefullest face to the audience at the outset. Put towards the end, after sufficient entertainment, the audience is both in a more gracious humor to receive it and in a better position to pass an opinion of its own.

Compare this with the publishers' reason for including Lanier in the series as advertised in their announcement: "the man who is fast coming into full recognition as one of the finest and truest of American poets." It is here immaterial as to which view is the right one: Professor Mims is a conscientious worker and the publishers are book producers of large experience. The real cause of the unsatisfactoriness to the reader is that the author hasn't convinced himself and is only half-hearted as to

his subject, however painstaking in pursuing it; and the result, perhaps unconsciously, is always a half apologetic one. The author is distinctly at his best in destructive criticism; constructively he fails either to interest or to convince. He will not defend Lanier as a whole, where, perhaps, Lanier is most defensible; for the nobility of Lanier's life, the sincerity of the struggle, the lofty ideals Lanier held before himself in every achievement, atone in counter-attractiveness for many obvious defects; but the author does defend Lanier repeatedly in minor details, which are really trivial and unimportant in their bearing. The author has kept his eye perhaps too closely upon "the men who have a right to speak with authority" and not so unreservedly on the higher possibilities of his subject.

Professor Mims is obviously afraid of enthusiasms. But why should he also shun so far all sparkle, humor, grace and charm? It is his merit that he is sane, cautious, deliberate; but these qualities, too, have their defects. The portrait grows singularly objective, and in its final appeal never glows with interior warmth as do the pictures, with singular unanimity, of all who knew Lanier and loved him. Here was life, work, tragedy — why can it not ring out? Here were great phases of the life and the culture of the era — in the opportunity and scope of chapters on the Johns Hopkins University and the New South — why are they not fully seized? The discussion of the "two types" and the "four Georgians," while cases in point, are far too restricted. It argues some deficiency both of knowledge and of sympathy with other parts of the country and phases of its life.

The relative interest in the biographical data and the setting is not increased as we proceed, as must have been the actual succession in the years of Lanier's life — for the last five or six were momentous years! — the interest decreases. A tragedy in effect needs dramatic insight in approaching its catastrophe and getting at its full meaning. The style of the later chapters shows less infusing spirit and the matter is more put together. The change in freedom and subtlety from Lanier's own words freely quoted — their sparkle and literary tonic quality — to the words of his biographer becomes too marked: Lanier's letters are the

most human and intimate part of him. Worn expressions and repetitions on different pages are apparent: "accessible to ideas," "passages that men will not willingly let die," "beautiful tributes," "another good one," "he says . . . he says," etc.

In the final estimate in the chapter on "Criticism and Poetry," which has some of Professor Mims's best work, Lanier is compared, and to his great disparagement, only with Lowell; and the same comparison has already been made more than once before. "It may be claimed without dispute that he was a rare good letter-writer; perhaps only Lowell's letters are more interesting." "He knew but little of the classics beyond what he studied in college; while he read French and German literature to some extent, he did not go into them as Lowell did." (pp. 344, 345). Why always Lowell — himself not a poet of the first distinction? The two were entirely dissimilar in temperament, in education, in travel, in opportunity. Perhaps the author intends to compare Lanier only with an American writer, but this is not made clear, and, in Lanier's case, is not altogether happy. When Lanier conspicuously built himself up on the example of certain nineteenth century English poets, it surely were more illuminating to rate him, however low, in terms of those who were his literary models and with whom he had spiritual kinship.

This is the fault we find with Professor Mims's work. He is perhaps not conscious himself how he takes the starch out of a reader's attention and fails to interest him in return. He is a careful and conscientious worker, perhaps too conscientious. He is not imaginative, is never magical in fancy, never indulges in humor and sparkle, is never impassioned at right moments — all qualities that Lanier could indulge. He seldom uses an illustration, even one taken from the wide realm of English literature of which Lanier was so fond (not American — how delightfully and unconsciously Southern Lanier was in that!). The biographer's literary style thus droops along with the repression of his natural feelings to which he has allowed himself no vent.

Granting that the verdict as to Lanier's poetry must be a guarded one, the resulting total impression, especially after the positive defense of certain details, should not be one altogether of de-

pression. It is not at all beyond credibility that a perfect stranger to Lanier's writings, perhaps even the majority of casual readers, should look over this biography and have no desire whatever of getting the volumes of Lanier's work and reading further — nay, even possess a definite feeling to the contrary. We ourselves believe that Lanier's life, like Sordello's, was one of struggle through very different phases, rather than one of achievement. But this could have been presented with such sympathy and insight, such humanness, that we should be drawn towards the man and his work and be impelled to look at his writings and read more, as the revelation of his spirit. As it is, the volume before us drives the reader to the wall and he finds himself involuntarily asking: And is this all in respect of the gifted poet-soul of the New South?

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